

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, May 25, 1899, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Beinn Bhreagh, C. B.
Thursday, May 25, 1899. Dear Mabel:

I started a note to you at Laboratory but was interrupted — but sent it just as it was so that you might see I had been thinking of you. I went over to Baddeck to meet Lina McCurdy as she had written to Miss McCurdy that she expected to arrive today. I hardly expected her, however, for no recent word had been received from her — still I thought she would be terribly disappointed if she arrived without a friend to greet her and bid her welcome. She did not appear and Miss McCurdy has telephoned me this evening that she has heard from Lina and that she expects to arrive tomorrow evening.

Mrs. Kennen has been hard at work upon her house improvements and telephoned several days ago that she did not want me to call until the house was in better condition. Today she telephoned that I might come — and I called on her this evening and walked from there to Baddeck. She has a surprise in store for Mr. Kennan when he comes on Saturday. His study is a creation of Art! As fine a room as one could wish for. Quiet — comfortable — roomy — and artistic. An ideal place for a literary man.

My father and Mrs. Bell are having a quiet — but I think — a happy time here. It is a great pleasure to me to have them here. Mrs. Bell is the most self-sacrificing 2 person I have ever seen — and seems devoted to my father — and he to her.

I supposed that as Mr. McCurdy's claims had been allowed at the Patent Office he would be anxious to come here — and so telegraphed that he might know I would be glad to have him. Your long telegram in reply fairly startled me out of my senses. Of course I would not for the world do anything to interfere with him. He has worked very hard over

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his photographic inventions and deserves success. I think very highly of all his inventions from the map-type up to the automatic gate — and photographic inventions — and believe there is money and success in them all if pushed into operation. The Day-light Developing Box — and specially the Automatic Counter — are very promising from a pecuniary point of view. The latter is specially promising from its simplicity and inexpensive nature. I only hope that after he gets his patents, he will be more persevering in his efforts to dispose of them and put the inventions into actual operation than he has been in the other cases. If so he will undoubtedly make money by them. On the other hand, should he desert his inventions as soon as the patents are secured and devote his energies to some new idea — without pushing his patents into operation. I fear he will die a poor man — unless someone leaves him a fortune — but brimful of ideas.

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I have made an arrangement with Frank McKeen to act as Secretary for me until the Northampton meeting — and he started very well today. I hesitated between Mr. Atwater and Frank McKeen for some time — but somehow or other I do not feel confidence in Mr. Atwater. I don't know why. He seems a fine bright intelligent and well informed man — and personally seems always to be willing to oblige everyone. Indeed he takes a great deal of trouble for others — and yet — and yet —?

I think the difficulty in my mind is — that he has no ostensible means of support. A man must live — and unless he has money how can he live without working? I don't understand that Mr. Atwater has money — but by what work does he live. He seems to have no business in life — and appears to have always spare time upon his hands. How does he live?

I can only come to one conclusion — he must live upon others — or he would starve without an occupation. Who then are those others? His mother? His sister and her husband? His friends? Does he support himself by calling on his friends and taking his meals with them alternately? The whole thing is a mystery to me. He must live somehow

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— and if he is content to live upon others without contributing to their support — or his own — by work — there must be something wrong in his make-up.

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I wish I could summon up courage to speak to him about himself. There is much in him that everyone must admire. He is a man of decided abilities and prepossessing manners — and I know nothing about him that is not in his favor. I do not feel comfortable in having a feeling of suspicion concerning a man — upon negative grounds alone. I have a good mind to ask him what he does for a living — and tell him exactly my condition of mind. I like the man personally — but on general grounds I distrust a man who has no ostensible means of support.

Frank McKeen has surprised me very greatly — by his willingness to work at anything he can get to do. He is making a little here and there — by house-painting and anything he can turn his hand to. This indicates a spirit of self-support that appeals to me. His abilities are away above anything he can find to do here — but he is not above honest work of any kind to get his own living — and enable him to carry out cherished schemes for his own advancement elsewhere in the future. I had always had the idea that he was self-conceited — and altogether too high and mighty to turn his hand to anything like house-painting. I have really been quite touched to see him in his workman's clothes doing common painters work. So I decided to try him on my work — in the afternoon.

He is to give me his afternoons after 12 o'clock. He can work at his painting and etc., in the foremoons and 5 will be with me from 12 to 1 every day — and work upon what I give him in the afternoons.

I was very much pleased with Daisy's paper on Wireless Telegraphy — and with her two letters to me. I am afraid she is nearer to me away than near. I do so long for the confidence of my children but I suppose the fault is my own —

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I feel more and more as I grow older the tendency to retire into myself — and be alone with my thoughts. I can see that same tendency in my father and Uncle in an exaggerated degree — and suppose there is something in the blood. My children have it too — but in lesser degree — because they are younger I suppose. You alone are free from it — and you my dear constitute the chief link between myself and the world outside. I had such a nice cheery note from Elsie that it came as a shock — a breath of fresh air in the sultriness of summer — and showed me how nice a thing a letter may be sometimes — when you feel forsaken and alone. I have been growing more and more lonely since I left Beinn Bhreagh for Japan. I enjoyed Japan — and travelling with you all — but longed for my laboratory work and Beinn Bhreagh home.

Washington life interested me too — but I found myself drifting further and further from you and my children all the time — hardly seeing you — never talking face to face and heart to heart.

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And now I am here — and I am happy in my work. I am happy in the company of my father and his kind wife — and the only think lacking is your presence and the presence of my children and all the loved ones I have left behind.

I am anxious that my WORK shall live after I have gone — but I cannot go on with it if interrupted constantly by change of residence. My problems unfortunately are great problems not to be solved without difficulty — and determined work. I have given several years of laboratory labor to Aerodromics and must end it — or have it end me. I am at it again with renewed energy and renewed hope — do not compel me to lay it aside again for another year after a few weeks of experiment. I feel that the importance of my work is sufficient to demand some consideration — and that it is not right to compel me to lay it all down again after the middle of June for the sake of a trip to Europe.

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My children have the greater part of their lives before them — mine is behind. I am not willing to die without completing some of the problems I have in hand. Don't ask me to spend my summer abroad this year — which means postponement of further experiments relating to Aerodromics — not for two or three months — but for a whole year. I cannot do it, I have no objection to your going abroad — no objection to Elsie and Daisy travelling — no objection to Charles-the-faithful accompanying you. I would like to go too — but I do object to stopping my 7 work here for a year. When the times comes that I must leave here anyway — in the autumn — then I don't care where I go — Norway — Berlin — Kamtchatka — if you will — but not during the precious summer months when alone — I can work here.

Better still would be to have you all come here for the summer — rest from the constant excitement of Washington would be good for you all — and then in the Autumn — end of September — I will go with you wherever you want to go.

I am planning now to return here immediately after the Northampton meeting to go on with my work. What will you do? If you decide to come here too — I will keep the house open here. If not — I will close the house here and live on the House-boat with Duncan to look after me.

It is now in beautiful order. I have had two state-rooms on one side thrown into one — making quite a nice bedroom. The improvement is so great that another similar room is now being made on the other side by throwing the bath-room and state-room into one. The outside berth, formerly occupied by Charles is being converted into a toilet room — and a three inch drain pipe is being run from it — to a cess-pool sunk in the beach near the salt water. The water-tanks in the boat are now being placed on the roof above the toilet room in a wooden case in form of a settee. The force pump will be used to pump them full of water from the pond — until we can make up our minds to lay a pipe to the stream 8 behind the pond and let the water rise — by its own fall!

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All the dead trees and etc., about the pond have been cleared away — and a man is at work clearing the bottom of the pond. The location is beautiful — and everything ideal — as a resting place. I wish you could see it.

Mr. McInnis has evidently tried in every way to please you and me and to do his duty by us. Everyone here tries to do what he thinks you would like. It really is quite touching to see this spirit breathed by all about us. Beinn Bhreagh never looked more beautiful.

Mr. McInnis was very faithful in regard to the burglar. He left home for days — and traced him personally from place to place in Cape Breton until at last he was captured in Mayaree. Don't you think we could do something to show our appreciation of his services. Mrs. Bell suggested a gold watch — but he has one already — and besides I think some other kind of recognition would be better.

I don't know what to do — but would like to make some formal presentation of something — that he would value — or at all events do something that would impress itself upon his mind and the mind of our neighbours — as a recognition of his services — especially in the matter of the Burglar.

I wish I could typewrite my letters to you — but I perhaps you have not as much difficulty in deciphering handwriting as I have. I would far rather have your letters in typewritten form — although sentimental reasons give individuality to manuscript — and therefore personal value. I like to see your handwriting occasionally — but oh! — the comfort of understanding your letters without effort! The days of handwriting have gone by forever. They belong to the 19th century. The 20th century will not tolerate manuscript. Still — my dear — just let me have a little P.S. occasionally in your own handwriting — just to comfort me and let me know that it really is you .

Your own, Alec.